

Lament: Efforts to Consider the Cultural Context in Accompanying Grieving People (English translation)

Rev. Alokasih Gulo

Abstract

Grief is a universal phenomenon experienced by humans from various life contexts. There are various ways to go through difficult times because of grief, one of which can be found in local traditions (religion and culture). This article focuses on exploring and utilizing Nias' cultural traditions in dealing with grief, with the intention of enriching the assistants, especially the ecclesiastical servants, in helping those who are grieving. This is done with the assumption that there are various potentials in local traditions (religion and culture) that can be used to develop a pastoral care model of grief.

Not all aspects will be explored in this article, the writer looks at aspects of expression of grief that in each tradition has its own uniqueness. One of the expressions of sorrow in the Nias tradition is mourning (*mangenu*).

This tradition can actually be found also in several biblical texts, asserting that there is nothing wrong with the lamenting tradition. This paper may not answer all questions, but at least can open the discourse to consider the cultural context in accompanying people who are grieving.

Key words: death, expression of grief, church, culture.

Preliminary:

WG is a 65-year-old mother (widow), living with her youngest child who is still not married. Her husband died in a car accident seven years ago, but the mother herself has not yet accepted the death of her husband. She stammered about the accident, and while crying, she admitted that she still had not received the death of her husband, she did not believe the disaster. When her husband died, she was asked by church workers and her extended family not to be too sad, because according to them believers should not be sad if a family member dies. Sermons on consolation worship continue to encourage her to give up her husband's departure, preachers say that everything happens by God's will. Mrs. WG could not do anything at that time, she just followed the advice of the church. However, for the seven years since her husband died, she kept a deep, long lasting grief at that time she did not dare to pass by in front of her late husband's office building, "very painful", he said.

The above case is a true story experienced by a woman born and raised in Nias culture. In the context of church service, his family is very active and supports various church activities. When her husband passed away, she actually wanted to express her deep grief, writing that the church and her extended family actually "forbade it" on the pretext of believers, especially church leaders, to be strong. As a result, his grief was not complete, he had to endure it for seven years, until he finally told it. Meanwhile, the church considers the problem of WG's mother's grief has been resolved, assuming that as a church leader, her faith must be strong, WG's mother must have given up her husband's departure.

Using the case above, this paper is intended to re-explore the wealth of local religion in relation to grief focusing on the expression of grief in the Nias tradition. The author will also review the church's attitude (BNKP) related to expressing grief. The focus of the discussion is indeed on the expression of grief, but of course it will discuss some important issues related to death in general in traditional understanding of Nias, and the attitude of the BNKP church itself towards death (or the dead).

Is that grief?

There are almost no people and cultures who do not recognize grief, it is considered common and so that makes it not completely defined. Edgar N. Jackson in his study of grief, found that there was no single definition of

"grief", both in the medical field (doctors), theology (theologians and clergy), psychology, and philosophy (cf. Jackson 1977, 16-17). Jackson himself seems to see sorrow in relation to human response to situations and events of loss (Jackson 1977, 17). Totok S. Wiryasaputra in his book "Why Grieve", compiled several opinions of experts and encyclopedias related to this definition of grief, all related to human feelings / emotions. He himself understood that grief is always directly related to losing something or someone that is considered valuable or valuable, so that grief can be said as a human reaction to defend themselves when facing a loss event (Wiryasaputra 2003, 25).

The author himself sees that grief is firstly related to losing something / someone that is meaningful, closely related to the situation / event of loss. However, grief too sometimes it has to do with other aspects that may not be directly related to the "loss" that is commonly understood. In the Bible, for example, we can find the sorrow a person feels because of sin (Ps. 38: 2-7; Jer. 23: 9; Ezra 10: 1, 6), because of deteriorating health (Job 1: 14-17), because of the suffering of others (Neh. 1: 3-4; Est. 3: 13-14), because of a child who deviates from the right path (Prov. 10: 1, 17:21), or because of separating from the person being served (1 Thess. 2:17). Because grief can be caused by many factors, it is necessary for the writer to emphasize that the grief referred to in this paper is a feeling of sorrow for the loss (death) of loved ones.

Grief in the Nias Tradition

Grief is a universal phenomenon that occurs in various places, experienced by all people without discriminating social status, gender, age, religion, origin, etc. Totok S. Wiryasaputra said that human experiences and responses about grief are actually the same, different is the way of expressing the grief experience (Wiryasaputra 2003, 15). The problem is that when the grief experience is not well expressed, it will leave a deep and unresolved suffering. This condition will certainly disrupt the motion of life of people who are grieving, Mrs. WG for example.

Because grief occurs in various places and is experienced by all people from various contexts, each context also has a "tradition" of expressing that experience. With this tradition, the grieved person is helped to face the difficult times until he is finally able to pass it through thoroughly. Likewise with the context of Nias, there are traditions that are usually carried out when grief events occur. This tradition certainly has something to do with death as the focus of this paper. How do Nias people understand death? Tuhoni Telaumbanua and Uwe Hummel say that as birth is generally seen as the beginning of one's life, marriage then unites two lives and ideally is the source of new life, death is seen as the end of life in this world, where the body (*boto*) becomes dust, while the soul (*noso*) returns to *Lowalangi* (the term for the highest in the Nias tribal religion), and the spirit (referred to as *bekhu zimate*) who is believed to be near the body will descend to the

underworld after four days of his death (Telaumbanua and Hummel 2015, 45-46). Interestingly, death is not the will of the Master of life as commonly understood today, but the will of the person concerned while still in the womb. This is seen for example through the phrase "*no irugi fangandrönia*" (arrived at request limits) (Telaumbanua and Hummel 2015, 46). That is why, if a person (usually a parent) feels that his time is near, especially if he is seriously ill, a parenting ceremony (*fangotome'ö*) is held. This ceremony is quite important, as noted by Tuhoni Telaumbanua and Uwe Hummel:

This is a sign of respect to parents, also to ask for blessings from him, as well as an opportunity for all relatives to forgive each other and make peace when there is a dispute. Sometimes parents share the inheritance for children on this occasion. (Telaumbanua and Hummel 2015, 47)

When someone dies, does the bond with the family break altogether? Not! For Nias people, people who have passed away, especially parents with high social status (nobility), still have a "bond" with their families. There is indeed a *fanibo tufo* (throwing mats) tradition or ceremony which is carried out four days after his burial with the intention that the deceased will no longer return home (W. Gulo et al, 2004, 86), but in fact the ties with the family are not broken at all. After four days also the glory of the deceased will be called to settle in the *adu zatua* (parent

statue), and is believed to be a source of blessing for the families left behind (Telaumbanua and Hummel 2015, 50). These quarrels are usually placed at the top of the house called "*Buatö*" (a kind of housebreak), with the intention that the parents who have passed away keep watching their family members, protect them from evil spirits, and bless them (Telaumbanua and Hummel 2015, 50). The *fanibo tufö* ceremony is no longer held now, replaced by the *fananö bunga* (planting flowers) ceremony which was referred to by W. Gulo et al as a ceremony with a Christian nuance (Gulo et al 2004, 87). It means, whether *fanibo tufö* or even *fananö bunga*, it still shows that for Nias people, the ties of people who have died with their families cannot be severed completely, there is always a bond. This can also be seen when the service for the end of the church year, many congregations cry at the Sunday service, in general they recall family members who have died.

Then, how do Nias people (according to Nias tradition) experience their grief when someone dies? As a society with strong social and family ties, from the past until now, many people have come to mourn the funeral home. They mourn to keep watch with the bereaved family, as well as entertain the family. Interestingly, there are also traditional ceremonies (although now reduced) called *molaya* (a kind of dance) and *hoho ba zimate* (a litany), which is done to honor the person who died, also to remind the family to keep the good name of the deceased (Telaumbanua and Hummel 2015, 49). *Hoho* is not a myth

(myth), but contains a fairy tale (folktale). It is said that a man named *Lawaendröna* sought eternal life, and *Lawaendröna* managed to find the place, on the moon (Mendröfa 1981, 199). Even though it is only a fairy tale, this hoho is told in a ritual of death, a tradition practiced in his day.

In addition, families are also given the opportunity to "cry over" the person who has died. In his lament, when family members express their grief, they are more free to "retell" important stories or certain memories of people who died, not infrequently weeping while telling stories (*mangenu* = wailing). In this lament, family members, even those who share the grief (though perhaps not family members), are given the opportunity to express their grief each, even at the time of the burial of the person who died.

Church's Attitude (BNKP) on Sorrow

BNKP's attitude towards grief is certainly related to his view of the death that caused the grief. Documents that can be used as a reference to find out the attitude of the BNKP are the BNKP Agendre Book (liturgical book) and related Regulations. Unlike the traditional understanding of Nias, BNKP does not see people who die separately, namely the body (*boto*), soul (*noso*), and (spirit). BNKP's view of the deceased is also unclear, besides repeating some biblical texts at the funeral of the deceased. The texts referred to include Psalm 103: 15-18; Psalm 90: 1-6;

Philippians 3: 20-21; Job 14: 1-2; 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-14, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 15: 42b-44a. Very briefly, there is no detailed explanation about BNKP's understanding of this text. Some things that might be understood from the view of the BNKP based on the texts in question, for example about human mortality, about death as part of God's grace, about the readiness and determination to deal with death and sorrow, and about everything happening by God's will.

Like the Protestant Church in general, BNKP emphasizes that there are no more living and dead relationships, so that all forms of offerings or gifts, even *fanibo tufo* traditions should not be made anymore, because the traditions are considered infidels (Gulo 1983, 207). This attitude of the BNKP has long been affirmed, set out in the 1961 article of the BNKP (*Amakhoita ba* BNKP Nias) Regulation 8. Although in a slightly different language, this attitude is still maintained until now, even the *Fananö Bunga* event must be done carefully so that it is not bound by old traditions. This is seen for example in BNKP Regulation No. 15 / BPMS-BNKP / 2013 concerning Pastoral Affairs, Article 8 paragraph 6. In the regulation the prohibition on "contacting" or communicating with (spirits) of people who have passed away is also prohibited from putting dead people's belongings in the grave as usual carried out in the original tradition of Nias. Why? Because all this is considered worship of ancestors, it is considered pagan belief. *Adu zatua* itself has long been "banished" by

the "order" of the missionaries because it is considered as idol worship, violating the second commandment on the prohibition of making statues. Even if in some places there are still quarrels, but because of the strict prohibition from the church, the contest is just a decoration of the house.

Meanwhile, the tradition of *hoho* and lamentation when someone dies has been left behind, there is no more room to express grief as is usually done in the Nias tradition. According to the church, believers should not be sad, may not weep for people who die as they once did, all the will of God and that person is God's property. There is a tendency to contrast faith with sorrow and grief. Expressing grief by crying as in the Nias tradition will be considered as a person who lacks faith, otherwise not crying will be considered a Christian who is strong and has strong faith. That was experienced by WG's mother when her husband passed away. As a result, he kept a deep sorrow in himself for up to seven years, a long and tiring time.

The above BNKP attitude emerged and developed as a result of the attitudes and teachings which were shown from the beginning by the missionaries who came to Nias. The missionaries who came to Nias had a Neo-Pietism background who considered themselves part of the reformation but without being bound by any of the traditions, both Lutheran and Reformed (cf. Gulö 2012, 55). The

main focus of the missionaries at that time was the salvation of souls by inviting the community to abandon the religion and culture of Nias which was mostly considered to be infidels and idols (Gulö 2012, 26, 61-62). This was done with the intention of reaching as many souls as possible in the dark. Although now missionaries from Europe no longer exist in Nias, but this pattern or approach is still very strong, this is seen in the attitude of the BNKP as explained earlier. In addition, the influence of triumphalism theologies on BNKP in recent years cannot be avoided. This is due to the large number of BNKP ministers who have a background in evangelical theological education who generally come from America. This theology strongly emphasizes the salvation of souls and the triumph or superiority of western culture (which is claimed to be the teaching of Christianity) over local culture.

Wailing as an Expression of Biblical Grief

Back to the case of WG's mother, who was forced to save and endure her grief for seven years because the church (and Christians) forbade it from expressing her deep sorrow and grief? The death of her husband is something that is very painful, especially her husband died in an accident. Using Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's theory of attitudes to death (cf. Kübler-Ross 1998, 48), the authors see several attitudes that occurred towards WG's mother have not been completely overcome. At first she was shocked by the sudden death of her husband, she was so angry with other motorists who crashed into her husband, and

until he told the writer he also still had not received and continued to deny events that made him die world. Unfortunately, the church and the people around it have "cut off" in such a deep grief process that the WG mother feels pressured from time to time. In essence, WG's mother was not given the opportunity to express her grief well, in the end she was unable to face and get through the difficult times completely. This is what is called unresolved grief.

Totok S. Wiryasaputra divides 3 types of unresolved grief, namely prolonged grief, delayed grief, and distorted grief (Wiryasaputra 2003, 37, 38, 40). Prolonged grief has something to do with past grief brought into present life, because grief does not go through the grief process properly (Wiryasaputra 2003, 37). Delayed grief occurs because a grieving person does not want, is unable, or has no opportunity to experience grief at the time or immediately after realizing loss (Wiryasaputra 2003, 38). Incomplete grief can also be called obstructed grief, arising from people who are grieved "forbidden" or advised by others (usually the clergy) so that they do not cry, it is better to leave everything to God (Wiryasaputra 2003, 40). This last grief is what happened to WG's mother, she was not allowed to cry, because according to church servants, believers do not need to weep for people who have died.

Many things can actually be done to help WG's mother when her husband dies, one of which is to provide an opportunity for him to channel his feelings / emotions

of grief well. The socio-cultural background and age of WG's mother certainly become important considerations in determining what ways should be done so that she is helped to face and get through these difficult times. The problem is that he was not given the chance at all from the start, eventually everything was buried, and that was very tormenting his life. With her socio-cultural background (born and raised in the Nias tradition), and her age (57 years old when her husband died), the writer sees that she should be given the opportunity to express her grief by wailing, that is, weeping freely over the death of her husband who died suddenly. The above has been explained that "wailing" is one of the Nias traditions that is carried out when someone dies.

The problem is that the church often rejects local religious traditions on the grounds that it is contrary to the teachings of Christianity based on the Bible. The church now only carries out consolation worship, with more advice to the families of the bereaved and those present at the service. This was also found by Aguswati Hildebrandt Rambe in her research on the death and grief rites on Sumba and Mamasa (Hildebrandt Rambe 2014). In the context of Nias, local traditions that give an opportunity for grieving people to express their grief through hoho and lamentation are dammed in such a way, replaced by something that is actually foreign to Nias people, something that forces the grieving person to forget their grief, while their deepest feelings are tormented from time after

time.

The question is whether "wailing" is indeed not biblical as Christian teachings claim? Howard W. Roberts sees that "wailing" has become a tradition that was commonly practiced in ancient times and the Bible never forbade it. According to him, weeping is part of a consolation and funeral service.

The purpose of a funeral or memorial service is twofold: to worship and to mourn. Mourning in worship has an ancient heritage as many of the psalms suggest. The lamenting mentioned in the psalms is often the response of the people for the sins they have committed, but there is also evidence of the congregation mourning losses. (Roberts 1995, 62)

So, it is clear that "weeping" is an expression of biblical sorrow. We can find a number of passages in the Psalms, for example, where the psalmist and people sometimes wail in such a way as to express their sadness as well as their request for the "grief" situation they are experiencing. The Book of Lamentations was filled with lamentations which weep over the fall of Jerusalem. Traditionally this book was read at a certain time in the Jewish liturgical year, namely on the ninth day of the month of Ab (around mid-July), when the Jews commemorated the destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

What about "wailing" in the Nias tradition? Why was abandoned and even considered as part of pagan beliefs? Questions like these cannot be answered simply. The above has explained the background of the missionaries and theological education background of some BNKP priests who tend to be "anti" local culture. This causes all local traditions, including wailing when someone dies, to be stopped, the authors of the church also do not offer anything much better than advice to not be too lost in sadness, to just let go of someone who is loved, wrapped in a sentence who anesthetized "God is the owner, and God already knows the best for him". It turns out that the problem of grief cannot be resolved in this way, instead making the gurus increasingly immersed in their pent up sorrow, WG's mother for example. That is why, according to the author, the church should provide broad opportunities for members of the congregation to express their grief either by "wailing" or by other similar means, in essence, the griever can get through these difficult times completely.

From the case of the WG mother, the authors see "wailing" as practiced in the Nias tradition can be used with consideration of age factors and socio-cultural background. Lamentations like this can be integrated with consolation and funeral services that are common today, of course by designing the right liturgy for this purpose. Examples of such liturgies can be seen in the work of Howard W. Roberts (Roberts 1995, 63-67). In addition, during

the assistance carried out after death and burial must also always provide freedom for the grieving to express their grief. The author's experience with WG's mother, although it requires a rather lengthy process, the writer gave her the opportunity to mourn by crying while retelling memorable stories together with her (deceased) husband. Many things were revealed during this mentoring process, until in the end she had become more open and more willing to accept the reality that her husband had passed away seven years ago.

What about those who don't know much about Nias local traditions, especially millennial generation? According to the authors, providing opportunities for them to "lament" is still possible. Beginning in 2017 the author taught in a pastoral class with the theme of grief. In accordance with the lecture plan that has been prepared, we started the pastoral class with a short service, singing and praying. The author deliberately chose the song "In Mother's Prayer" because the author had previously traced the "past" of the students and many of them had lost their parents but they had not gone through the difficult times completely. Accompanied by the guitar, we sang together the song, and as a result all students cried, and the writer released them for it. After completing the lecture, there were a number of students who came to the writer and wanted to tell their heartaches because their father or mother passed away a few years ago.

Departing from this experience, the author sees that "weeping" can be done to provide broad opportunities for gurus to express the grief that is being experienced. Once again, considerations that must be taken into account in determining what lamentation is appropriate include: age, socio-cultural background, and the current context. In this way, the church can help people who are grieving, both personally and communally. Meanwhile, the gurus can experience, live and express their grief freely, so that in the end they can get through these difficult times completely.

Closing:

Andreas A. Yewangoe in his introduction in the book Aguswati Hildebrandt Rambe "*Keterjalinan dalam Keterpisahan*", ensures that death (and grief) must be experienced by anyone, even by all beings, with human records (being able to question it), as humans also question the origin his life (Hildebrandt Rambe 2014, 13). This is no doubt, and it seems that everyone is aware of it, even though many are trying to forget it. The problem is not the death itself, but the human reaction to the death, especially the reaction of people left behind by the deceased. This is where "grief" plays an important role in humans, roles that might foster, or conversely roles that might drown. It depends on how humans deal with it, and in the context of Christianity, the church plays an important role in helping its citizens face and live their grief.

This article, entitled "Merataplah: Upaya Member-timbangkan Konteks Kultural dalam Pendampingan terhadap Orang-orang yang Berduka", tries to invite the church to look at grief from the perspective of the grieving themselves, not from the perspective of church teachings inherited from the west. This is the "scream" of grieving people to be heard by the church so that they are given ample opportunity to express their grief. This is a "call" to the bereaved so that the church will immediately improve its approach in assisting those who are grieving by considering their context, rather than being part of those who demonstrate the superiority of (Western) Christian tradition over local traditions.

In the previous description it has also been explained that there are various ways that can be done to assist those who are grieving, one of which is mentoring care. This is one part of the ritual care, which actually already exists in the Christian tradition in all its forms, and of course it already exists in the traditions of local religions. It is very biblical and contextual when grieving people are given the opportunity to express their grief by "wailing", so that they can resolve the grief. In this frame the church should be present with them, wailing with the priests. The Apostle Paul said: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep!" (Romans 12:15).